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Abington Presbyterian Church

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2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Luke 9:51-62

REMEMBER THE FOLLOWING

Vacation Bible School was a bit different this year. As a result of the anticipated construction, and a desire to not have to worry about possible construction noise during the day, a decision was made months ago to make this year's VBS an evening, intergenerational event. Many of you made it a wonderful week of enriching experiences. On Wednesday, we had a picnic across the street in the cemetery, followed by a variety of activities, one of which was a David Rowland-led tour of the rich history represented by the lives of those interred there. Among those mentioned on the tour was Colonel Charles Grymes McCawley, the 8th Colonel Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, who served in that highest-ranking position in the Marines from 1876 to 1891. It was McCawley who chose the official Marine motto to be 'Semper Fidelis,' which means 'Always Faithful.' He also was responsible for naming John Philip Sousa as leader of the United States Marine Band in 1880. ¹ Sousa, who wrote music for 137 marches throughout his career would become known as the 'March King,' One of his most famous marches is entitled, 'Semper Fidelis,' written three years before Colonel McCawley's death, taking its name from the motto McCawley had chosen for the Marine Corps. It now serves as the official U.S. Marine march. ²

There were no military bands playing and no parade as Jesus started his journey toward Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry, as told in the Gospel of Luke, changes tone in the ninth chapter, as he is at that point on the way to where he would die. Whereas 'Semper Fidelis' for the Marines means always faithful to the United States and to the Marine Corps, Jesus was dedicated to being always faithful to God. As followers of Jesus Christ, what would it mean for us to be 'semper fidelis,' always faithful?

We hear several conversations between various people and Jesus, through which Luke helps us explore some of the challenges of being a follower of Jesus. The first conversation is with two of his closest disciples, James and John. On their way

from Galilee, which was the home front of Jesus' ministry, moving toward Jerusalem, they go through Samaria. There had long been a broad hatred between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans claimed to have maintained the worship of the God of Israel in their land, whereas the other Israelites became corrupted during extended times in exile. The Jewish version of the same events had their ancestors returning to faithfulness toward God, whereas the Samaritans were understood to have been complicit with their pagan captors, thereby becoming corrupt in both ethics and religious practice. ³

The Samaritans understood Samaria to be the primary religious destination. So when they heard that Jesus was heading to Jerusalem, they wrote him off. James and John were offended by the reaction and were eager to ask for God's fiery judgment to be rained down upon them. Some people want to tell Jesus where to go in leading them and others who had been following him don't have a clue about the divine grace that is central to his message. If we are to be *semper fidelis*, it won't necessarily be a physical destination toward which we are moving, but in regards to those with whom there are strained relationships, we will be trying to move away from retribution and toward reconciliation.

There were other people along the way who then said to Jesus, they would follow him wherever he went. In response, Jesus talks about not having a place to stay. He actually is not very accommodating about accommodations in following him, but perhaps we can hear his caution that to follow him faithfully means that we will not be focused on where we will stay for we will be, at least figuratively, on the move. We can't just stay where we have always lived emotionally, spiritually, or theologically. Rootedness for a disciple of Jesus does not lie in physical structures. It's been said, "Home is where the heart is," ⁴ and being a disciple means welcoming God's reign over our hearts, wherever that sovereignty might lead us.

Jesus then borders on being rude to the man who wanted to follow him, but only after burying his father. I don't think following Jesus means we are to be less than compassionate to those who are grieving. However, we can recognize that our Lord leads us toward the direction of life, not towards death. Those who are grieving can understand the death of loved ones differently because of Jesus' presence and ministry. We can still move forward even upon suffering our greatest losses, and

we need to move beyond death as followers of Jesus. This was an excellent reason for the man to delay following Jesus, but excellent excuses can be the most dangerous ones. Always being faithful in following our Lord is to be the highest priority.

Jesus then uses plowing imagery, saying we can't plow in a straight line if we are looking backwards. Whether it was looking back at conveniences or family or something else left behind, constantly looking back is not the orientation for moving forward. It can't be our orientation if we are trying to follow someone who is ahead of us. The plowing imagery also indicates that the way forward may be slow and difficult. When you are plowing, the return on one's efforts, the harvest, is likely to be some time away. There is an African American spiritual that was often sung during the push for civil rights that includes these words, "I got my hand on the gospel plow, won't take nothing for my journey now, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!"⁵

Yes, we need to hold on, because as followers of Jesus Christ, we will take on some of the frustrations he faced. Frankly, there are easier ways to live than to be a follower of Jesus. If we don't feel like we are called to love others deeply, it won't matter to us so much what choices others make or what happens to them. A father and a daughter can end up face down at the edge of the Rio Grande, and some would think there is no reason to alter our course. An apathetic life can be less frustrating than following the ways of our loving Lord. If we can focus just on our own agenda instead of seeking God's direction for our lives, it will be less frustrating (at least in the short run). If we don't have to limit our methodology to what is honest and peaceful, if we can say whatever the hell we want, if we can disrespect whomever we want, if we can with impunity move away from what is just and true, we might be less frustrated (in the short run).

How far then do we have to go in following Jesus? I can't tell you. Neither can I tell you a compass direction to follow. But part of the distance and direction we will be asked to travel is to move from selfish priorities toward Godly ones. Part of our task will be trying to diminish the distance between what we say we believe and what we do. The amount of time to follow Jesus? It's not something we do just for a brief time or just on Sundays. It's for the full course of our lives, and with all of

the frustrations that come with it, there is also fulfillment that will far exceed the frustrations along the way. I'm so glad Jesus didn't allow the frustrations he faced to stop him in his tracks. He sought simply to be always faithful to a God who wants so much for you and me and this world. We too are called to such a vision to be always faithful as followers of Jesus Christ. Following requires follow through. For us, *semper fi* can be more than a motto; it reminds us of our highest loyalty to the One who truly is always faithful to what is good and right for us all when he says, "Come, follow me."

¹ Taken from a pamphlet prepared by the Historical Committee of Abington Presbyterian Church regarding the history of the cemetery, revised September, 2018

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Philip_Sousa

³ From Sharon H. Ringe's *Westminster Bible Companion on Luke*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

⁴ Attributed to Pliny the Elder, 1st century C.E.

⁵ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/saragroves/eyesontheprize.html>